

Something Old, Something New

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID HAUETER

An old friend and a promising newcomer
score wins at Grand Am's
Mid-Ohio Road Racing Classic



In the ever-changing world of professional sports-car racing, the fortunes of the various series shift with the changing moods of sponsors, team owners, and rules-makers. What is here today may not be here tomorrow, and what seems like a strong series this year may be fighting for existence the next. Grand Am is going through a "transition" year in 2003 with the Rolex Sportscar Series, as they seek to build their premier Daytona Prototype class while gradually merging the GTS and GT classes into one. Amid all the changes, the supporting Grand Am Cup Street Stock series provides great racing from a variety of models in four different classes.

Grand Am Cup: Diversity has always been a strong point in Grand Am Cup, as BMW fans can cheer everything from E36 and E46 M3s to the 330i, the Z3 coupe, and the new Z4 or Mini Cooper S on race weekends. Grand Am Cup's rulebook is written to give some of the older cars more speed, which makes for an interesting combination of newer BMWs racing against older ones, all posting similar lap times (see boxed data). The Mid-Ohio Road Racing Classic, held in late June, gave fans a sample of the potential of the TC Kline Racing Z4s, as well as the continuing ability of the E36 M3 to win against newer and more powerful opposition.

TC Kline has a wealth of knowledge on preparing BMWs for racing and has been busy developing the Z4 in Grand Am Cup this season. His two Z4s race in the STI class against proven Z3 coupes run by Villaconn Racing and Duane Neyer Motorsports, as well as the 330i of CSL Racing and the new Mini Cooper S models from Nuzzo Motorsports and Sterling Motorsports. While the BMW teams are strong, the prime competition has come from the Team Lexus IS300s and the Honda of America Racing Team (HART) Acuras, which both receive factory backing. Another strong opponent has been the SpeedSource Porsche Boxster.

Despite the competition, the Z4 has steadily improved all year. By the third race of the season at Phoenix, the Z4 made its first trip to the podium with a third-place finish by the #92 car. Podium finishes came in the next two races, as well, with a second by the #12 car at Barber Motorsports Park and another third by #12 at California Speedway.

At the mid-season race at Watkins Glen, TC Kline Racing's hard work paid off, with Don Salama and Steve Pfeffer scoring a convincing win in the rain—the first by a Z4 in pro racing. Confidence was high traveling to the Buckeye State, as the more technical corners of Mid-Ohio would complement the Z4's strengths in handling and



Speed TV interviews Don Salama and Steve Pfeffer after their impressive win at Mid-Ohio.



The Marcus Motorsports M3 remains in the GT championship hunt, thanks to persistence and determination on the part of the drivers and team.



Automatic Racing's M3 looked splendid in qualifying, but suffered damage on the first lap that rearranged the front end.



The Picchio can throw flames with the best, but has been a non-factor in the Daytona Prototype class this season.

braking, and they drew first blood in qualifying by sweeping the front row. Drivers Salama and Pfeffer wouldn't look back for the entire 2.5-hour race, leading all 82 laps and scoring the team's second consecutive victory, followed by a Team Lexus IS300 and a HART Acura RSX-S. Team Villacorn's Z3 coupe finished fourth.

Grand Am Cup's GSII class is populated by a mix of American and German sports cars, with everything from Ford Mustangs and Pontiac Firebirds to Porsche 911s and Audi S4s. Nissan's 350Z is also racing in this class and has shown good potential in its first season. BMW is represented in GSII by the familiar Bell Motorsports E36 M3 driven by Forrest Barber and Terry Borcheller, and Automatic Racing's M3s. The Bell M3 has been fast this year but has had some bad luck. Nevertheless, they scored the first BMW win in GSII this season at California Speedway, where Borcheller also set the fastest race lap.

Automatic Racing has been interesting to follow this year, as they are racing a new E46 M3 along with a more developed E36 M3. Their drivers have been a familiar sight on

the podium, with the #09 E36 M3 of Jep Thornton and David Russell making it to the podium in three of the first four races. Development of the E46 M3 has paid dividends, with Terry Earwood and Eric VanCleaf putting the car on the podium at Phoenix.

Coming into Mid-Ohio, BMW was represented by only two M3s in GSII. Automatic Racing's E46 M3 blew an engine at California Speedway and did not race at Watkins Glen or Mid-Ohio, as the team elected to focus on the E36 car, particularly since there was little downtime between races. Thornton and Russell started from fourth at Mid-Ohio and reached second place by Turn One, but on the first lap they had Corvette contact that required a lengthy visit to the pits. Meanwhile, Forrest Barber was running a steady race in the Bell Motorsports M3, moving the car from ninth to second before handing it off to Borcheller. He gave chase to the leading Mustang Cobra SVT, posting the fastest race lap and passing the Mustang on the last lap for the win.

Rolex Sportscar Series: It has been a strange year for the Rolex Sportscar Series, as the new premier class of Daytona Proto-

types (DP) evolves and Grand Am tries to establish that class while retaining GT and GTS teams. There have been only four DP teams running consistently in the series, with two Porsche-powered Fabcars from Brumos Racing, the Chevy-powered Doran of Bell Motorsports, and the M5-powered Picchio of G&W Motorsports. Whether you like the cars or not, there has been some great racing in the DP class among the Brumos and Bell cars, with enough fender-banging and passing going on that it almost makes the awkward appearance of the cars irrelevant.

Unfortunately, the M5-powered Picchio DP has not been a contender. The car has a good powerplant and a strong team with first-rate drivers, but the car just hasn't come along nearly as quickly as the other DPs have. The Picchio is reasonably quick when it's working right, but often ends up behind GTS and even GT teams by the end of the race as they experience myriad problems. At Homestead, the cockpit of the car was so hot that driver Darren Law had blisters on his feet at the end of his stint, and a fire during the pit stop didn't help. At Phoenix, a race that ran into the night, the car had faulty headlights and the team had to resort to a flashlight and duct tape to finish the race.

G&W had the Picchio working better by the race at Barber Motorsports Park, but had contact with another car that broke the steering rack. Bad luck continued at both California and Watkins Glen as electrical and handling problems put the car out of contention. At Mid-Ohio, the problems continued, as the car qualified fourth in class and ninth overall—behind several GTS cars—and finished last in DP and eighth overall. You have to wonder how long G&W Motorsports will keep putting time and money into playing catch-up with a car whose potential is doubtful at best. The Bell Motorsports Doran won the race overall from pole position, taking home wins in both Grand Am Cup and the Rolex Series.